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LONDON FOR TSOU, PARIS FOR ZEYA

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [SY](#)

SUBJECT: CIVIL SOCIETY ACTIVISTS PROTESTING 43 YEARS OF  
EMERGENCY LAW FACE WELL-ORGANIZED COUNTERDEMONSTRATION

Classified By: Charge d'Affaires Stephen A. Seche for reasons 1.4(b)/(d)  
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11. (C) SUMMARY: A group of approximately fifty civil-society activists staged a protest against 43 years of Emergency Law at the Palace of Justice in downtown Damascus on March 9. There was little visible uniformed security in the area, one of Damascus's main pedestrian thoroughfares. A well-outfitted but rowdy group of about 300 young people, many university and high school students, marched to the Palace of Justice and staged a pro-regime counterdemonstration, seizing placards from the civil society protesters and chanting pro-Syrian and pro-Bashar al-Asad slogans. As both protests began to wane, pro-regime demonstrators began to attack small groups of remaining civil society protesters, beating them with sticks used to carry the Syrian flag. Early information from human rights organizations indicate about ten to fifteen injured protesters, but no arrests. END SUMMARY.

12. (C) Approximately fifty protesters staged a peaceful demonstration to express their opposition to the existence of Emergency Law in Syria, still in force after forty-three years of Ba'th Party rule, at the Palace of Justice in downtown Damascus, which serves as a main criminal courthouse for the city. The demonstration, reportedly organized by the Damascus Declaration group, was publicly announced on the reformist website arraee.com and by word of mouth among activists. Participants included members of the Human Rights Association of Syria and the Atassi Forum, as well as individual activists and rights lawyers. Another thirty to forty human rights and opposition activists, as well as Poloff and representatives from the Norwegian and Canadian embassies, were also present as observers. The protesters gathered quietly in front of the main gate of the Palace of Justice, and at precisely 1:00 p.m., brought out placards with a variety of slogans protesting the continuation of Emergency Law and shouted slogans.

13. (C) Nearly simultaneously, a counterdemonstration of young people appeared, marching towards the Palace of Justice, with many bearing large, brand-new Syrian flags, mounted posters of Bashar al-Asad, and wearing brand-new white baseball caps bearing the Syrian flag. Led by a 30-something organizer who directed both the movements and chants of the students throughout the event, the counterdemonstrators chanted pro-Bashar and pro-Syrian slogans, such as "Allah, Bashar, and Syria only" and "Traitors Get Out." They created a semi-circle around the civil society protesters, and began swarming forward, pushing and eventually displacing the civil society protesters from the locked gate of the Palace. They also seized the placards out of the hands of the civil society protesters, and at one point gathered all the ripped-up posters together and threw

them in the air. When asked by Poloff why they had come, a group of counterdemonstrating university students answered "because of March 8" and "to beat the 'enemy'." Another group of 17- and 18-year old high school students said they had been given the afternoon off. Indeed, after about 20 minutes, many of the students could be seen drifting off towards the nearby Hamadiya bazaar.

¶4. (C) However, a core group of about 150 aggressive males remained and began to split off into groups and, at the direction of the protest organizer, charged towards the remaining civil society activists, using flagpoles and sticks as weapons. Poloff witnessed one individual (it is unclear whether he was an activist) being chased by a group of about fifteen students, as well as the assault of one activist, who was swarmed by students and hit atop the head. Other observers reported similar beatings. No action to prevent the assaults was taken by the small number of police officers present. (NOTE: The only obvious increase in police presence was the stationing of five uniformed officers in front of the Palace's main entrance, behind the locked main gate, and the addition of a paddywagon. END NOTE) According to human rights activist Anwar al-Bunni, at least ten to fifteen protesters (including prominent activists Hassan Abdulazeem, Ali Abdullah, and the head of an Assyrian organization) were beaten, as was a female journalist who identified herself as such to her assailants. Bunni noted that the assailants were a mixture of security service thugs and students.

¶5. (C) COMMENT: As with the March 10 demonstration last year, also against the Emergency Law, the SARG succeeded in breaking up the assembly without having to bring out uniformed security forces or, as it currently stands, arresting anyone. The SARG continues to summon genuine students as protesters, some of them aggressive Ba'th Party

activists all-too-willing to beat up on outnumbered civil society activists. The usual core group of aggressive security service agents helped out where they could. END COMMENT.  
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